

## Ep #294: How Niching Down Builds Business Resilience with Liz Toombs



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**Tobi Fairley**

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You are listening to *The Design You Podcast* with Tobi Fairley, episode number 294.

Welcome to *The Design You Podcast*. A show where interior designers and creatives learn to say no to busy and say yes to more health, wealth and joy, here's your host, Tobi Fairley.

Hey, friends. Today on the podcast I have my friend, Liz Toombs, who does sorority house design. And this is a fun one for me, not only because I was in a sorority way back in the day, but my daughter has just gone through the sorority rush experience and did pledge a house, and my niece did as well.

So this is very top of mind for me and especially with my daughter, she's at the point of trying to make a decision if she's going to live in the house as a sophomore or maybe wait and live in there as a junior or not living there at all. But she spends a lot of time there. She's always hanging out there in between classes, hanging out with her besties and her 'big', her big sis for the sorority. And definitely gets a lot of use out of this facility, one of her homes away from home. So as a mama, this experience, this design niche has a whole new meaning for me than it did way back in the day when I was living in a sorority house myself.

So Liz Toombs owns PDR Interiors, based in Lexington, Kentucky. And she specializes in sorority house design as you'll hear her talk all about. She does a tiny bit of other things here and there, but mostly the majority of her work is sorority house design on campuses all across the country. And her work has been featured in all kinds of wonderful places, including the Wall Street Journal.

And so I can't wait for you to hear about this unique niche because a lot of us are afraid, us creatives are afraid to niche our business or niche our business as Liz calls it. We're afraid to pigeonhole ourselves. We start to worry that certain kinds of business won't have enough business. And ironically, it's a lot of the more specialized businesses that are more

## Ep #294: How Niching Down Builds Business Resilience with Liz Toombs

resilient when the economy is soft or there is a recession or other things. So that's all the stuff Liz and I talk about on today's episode. So I can't wait for you to enjoy this interview with my friend Liz Toombs.

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Tobi Fairley: Liz, welcome to *The Design You Podcast*. I'm so glad you're here.

Liz Toombs: Thanks for having me, Tobi. I'm excited to talk with you.

Tobi: We have had fun getting to know each other the last few years as you've been in some of my programs. And done some even think tank kind of sessions even in my own living room. And I feel like we're practically besties by now. But for all the people that aren't yet, haven't had the privilege of meeting you, why don't you tell us a little bit about you and a little bit about your business and kind of what you do.

Liz: Yeah, absolutely. I am based in Lexington, Kentucky and I own PDR Interiors. We're a very small design firm and we focus on design work for sorority houses. We work on college campuses in these Greek environments. And that's a niche that we've been working on since probably 2010, I think if memory serves. But yeah, so my whole team is remote and we're based in different places. I've got one in Louisville, Kentucky, one down in South Carolina and yeah.

Tobi: Amazing. And you only do sorority house design or do you do any other projects?

Liz: We do residential as well. Over the years, we've lessened how much we're doing residential work. And we still work with repeat customers that call us back and take on some new customers here and there. But it really is a matter of how it fits in with our Greek workload.

## **Ep #294: How Niching Down Builds Business Resilience with Liz Toombs**

Tobi: Amazing. I love that. Okay, 2010, I recall those time periods very well, but that was right after the 2008/2009 recession. And I think this is a timely topic because all we keep hearing for the last year or so is are we in a recession? Is a recession coming? Are things going to crash or change? And you're a prime example of someone who built a business, or at least a niche, really post-recession, post-crash. So talk to us a little bit about what that was like. What brought you to this industry? Was it because of the recession? And how did that set you up, do you think with a special opportunity coming out of that economic downturn?

Liz: I did not intentionally seek this out or to seek out carving out a niche following the recession. I started my business when the company that I worked for closed up as a result of the recession, making it have hard times. So I just went out on my own. And then through some of my local contacts was offered a fraternity house actually to work on. And so I said yes and did that project and then was referred to a sorority space and worked with them. And then I started to see this world that there was in that industry.

And so I started to explore it some more and just built relationships with people involved in that housing community. And just kept doing the projects over the years and found out that I really liked doing it. Not everyone has their business set up to be able to do projects remotely. And we figured out how to make that work and succeed at that. And it's fun, too, to be frank. It's fun to travel and to get to see different campuses in different states. And so we just built that slowly as we've gone.

And so as I mentioned, we've tapered off the residential work and even commercial work that we were doing here in Kentucky. And just still letting the Greek side of things build. And because of the travel we were just trying to leave ourselves open to be able to serve those clients. And so now here we are, maybe on another recession like you said.

And so I'm finding that having that specialized audience is helpful for me because I'm not feeling like I have to scramble and see how I can serve

## **Ep #294: How Niching Down Builds Business Resilience with Liz Toombs**

everyone in these economic times. I can just hone in and listen to those clients and see what's changing for them and adapt to serve them right now.

Tobi: That's amazing. So how many, in any given year, how many of those projects are you working on?

Liz: It varies from year to year, anywhere from 10 to 15 is normal for summer installs, but we've worked on over 100 campuses across 25 plus states. So we've done a lot of work in a lot of places.

Tobi: That's amazing. And a lot of people are afraid of niches or niching, whichever you prefer to call it. And the industry you're in sounds like one that if you were listening to your own brain, you would think, isn't there a limit to the number of those projects? How many of those could there possibly be? But that's not at all the case. You're constantly either redoing or starting over on these projects.

So tell us a little bit about how that works and is there, so I'm assuming knowing what I know about you, that there's plenty of this work for a long time career. But to help people that would be afraid of that kind of niche.

Liz: Yeah, sure. So the standard timeline for a Greek house refresh is they come in, do furniture, and five to seven years is how long they expect it to last. Sometimes you can get it to last 10, but that's the typical timeframe for turnover. And yes, to your point, there's plenty of these spaces. They're not all going to be the giant, stereotypical story houses that you see on television or in movies. Some of them are just smaller spaces or even townhouse style facilities.

So we've worked on all of those styles and there's plenty of those. And like I said, if they're refreshing on that cycle, then you're able to go back. And it's really fun for us to get to go back and work on a property that we may have worked at seven years prior and then we get involved and do a refresh. Because you have to think, the students are turning over every four

## **Ep #294: How Niching Down Builds Business Resilience with Liz Toombs**

years or so. And so there's a whole new clientele almost at that point, and a whole new look.

Tobi: Right. And you aren't really thinking about, especially somebody like me who normally does residential. You forget that in some of these houses like the ones in Arkansas where my daughter is currently, there's 180 girls in their pledge class these days. When I was there, there was 40 people. And when you have 400 or 500 girls, not all of them are going to be at the house all the time and super active. But even if you have 200 or 300 that are there regularly, that is a lot of wear and tear on those spaces.

Liz: It really is. And so that's what's unique about this clientele is that it needs to look residential and feel really comfortable and supportive to these students as they're going through college. But it has to hold up like it's a hotel because like you're saying, it's hundreds of people coming through. If not chapter members, it's during recruitment. Things get moved around. It takes a beating. And so things really have to be able to hold up to that.

Tobi: So what are some of the things that surprised you or that people might not know about that come to mind when you think about how this business or this industry is different than the work that a lot of us do in interior design? So obviously what you just said, the wear and tear. But are there other things that we're not thinking about when it comes to the process, maybe the budgeting or the money or it may be easier, it might be harder. What are some of those kind of aha moments about this industry?

Liz: I think for sure, it's easy for anyone on the outside to say, "You just want to make the house pretty." You want to make it look good because there's been a lot of sorority projects that have ended up in magazines and in some different spaces. But really it's about a lot more than that. It really is comfort, it's about mental health is a big discussion right now in these spaces. And trying to figure out how the spaces can support these women in their studies and just in their general life.

## **Ep #294: How Niching Down Builds Business Resilience with Liz Toombs**

And so that's a huge conversation that most people wouldn't think would be a part of this. But budgeting that you brought up is another interesting factor. Sometimes the budgets are big because they are a big chapter, they're able to save a lot of money over the years. And then other times it's really a struggle to come up with the money to keep up the facility. And the facility is a part of staying competitive on a campus. I'm sure you know this with your experience and with Ellison. But it's a huge part of being competitive.

And so while it may not be the only thing, it's a component. And so sometimes you have to really work to figure out how can we create a durable, comfortable space with a limited budget.

Tobi: Yeah, when Elsa was going through rush, which was now just what was that, three months ago? But it seems in some ways like 10 years ago and sometimes like yesterday because it is what it is, which we all know what I'm talking about, a lot of us do. But the interesting thing with her being the child of an interior designer and having a flair for fashion and stuff. It was so fun to watch her go through because the house actually, the houses swayed her a lot.

And so she ended up not picking the one, the one where she ended up landing, that was a perfect fit for her, is not her favorite house. There's another one that she kept moving up in her kind of ranking. So she was like, "I never would have thought I wanted to be there." But she was like, "Mom, their house is amazing." And she'd tell me about the design and the fitness room and the movie theater and all the things.

And I'm like, "I would want, yes, that would make me want to live there too." When you said it plays a big role in their competitiveness. I can really see that now a lot more than when I was there back however long ago that was, 25 or 30 years ago. Because that's exactly the experience she had, which was so interesting.

## **Ep #294: How Niching Down Builds Business Resilience with Liz Toombs**

Liz: Yeah. Think about dorm rooms even. I remember my dorm was so dark, it was cinder block, it was 70s still by the time I got there, it was, whatever, it was the place to live, it was fine. But now at Kentucky, they've got tempur pedic mattresses and private bedrooms and really nice bathrooms. And so all of these things are playing into the student experience and making them want to come to these universities. So it's a big part of recruiting.

Tobi: Yeah. And there's entire businesses now, people who just do dorm rooms as a related niche to what you're doing. And so many of those I encountered in the process of moving her, doing her dorm. And all these people follow these one or two particular accounts on Instagram and TikTok, that do all these dorm rooms. It's so fun. Which really shows that anything could potentially be a niche in the interior design business, truly, if there's a need, if there's going to be a lot of people living in a space or using a space over and over. That's a fun and exciting place to be.

So as far as the client experience, I can only imagine that in some ways it would be a lot easier, more like a commercial experience, because I've dealt with some of those. Not quite as emotionally attached as a person picking out just for their own home and their own sofa and the thing they're going to have to live with forever. Is that true? Is my assumption true there? And what is your experience? When is it easier and when is it harder than maybe residential as far as the client goes?

Liz: Your assumption is partially true. So a little bit of background on the decision makers for these projects. Sometimes it's at a headquarters level. There's a housing department that is driving these projects and calling in my team. And in those instances it is pretty easy because most of the time they're a repeat client. We understand what they're going for, what they want to accomplish. We can get a little bit of intel on campus culture and what the chapter likes and pull all that together and it is a pretty smooth process.

## Ep #294: How Niching Down Builds Business Resilience with Liz Toombs

In other instances, if it's a locally run house corps board, and so for those who may not know what that means. If you're a volunteer and alum of the organization and you're managing the house. Sometimes getting a group like that of volunteers who do not do this every day. That can become a little bit more challenging because it just requires a little bit more education for them. It's much like if someone's building a house for the first time, they've never done it before. They don't know what to expect.

There can be decision fatigue, there can be a lot of apprehension because they're trying to be fiscally responsible. So that just takes a little bit more one-on-one conversation and education and just managing their expectations for the project. And so those are the two opposite ends of the spectrum with the clients that we work with.

Tobi: Yeah, I love that. That's so good. So another of the things that you've shared with me is that you really love a couple of things. Something I know about you is that you've done a great job of diversifying your revenue streams and you can talk about that in a second. But then one of your other priorities is that you really love giving back in all sorts of ways.

So tell us a little bit about what that looks like for you. Because we're in this mindset right now as your episode's going live around a week or so before Thanksgiving, thinking about this very kind of thing and giving back. So what does giving back look like in a business like yours? And how does this unique niche make it even more accessible for you to give back?

Liz: Yeah, I think I like to give back in a couple of ways. One would be obviously monetarily into causes that mean something to me and to my team. But the biggest way that I try to give back is pouring back into students and that's through internships and shadowing opportunities within our company. From the time that I started my company in '09, I have always had an intern, at least one per year. And I've pulled back from—because I'm in Lexington, the University of Kentucky, it's just the easiest. But we've opened it up to other schools as well.

## **Ep #294: How Niching Down Builds Business Resilience with Liz Toombs**

And just trying to let students be able to come in and be able to see what it's like to run a business day, to understand the inner workings of things. Because I say this all the time, I sound like a broken record. I think college is really great for preparing us to do our craft, but they don't necessarily teach you how to get the clients or how you get from point A to point B. Because you don't just walk out of school and immediately land a six figure job and have a huge book of business.

Anyway, so I just try, I try to give students opportunities to see what it's like. Because sometimes this could mean, oh gosh, I don't want to work in this industry at all. Other times it's okay, this is definitely the right place for me. And sometimes it's well, I want to tweak where I thought I was going with it. Maybe I was headed residential and I'd like to do something more commercial or vice versa.

And I really enjoy just learning from the students too, just keeping tabs with what's going on with that age group. Because I think that then in turn helps me and the rest of the team when we are creating spaces for college students in the sororities. Because we're able to understand what they're going for, what the trends are and what their needs are.

And so for me, that's all full circle. And I really enjoy getting to know the students. I keep up with, I think, almost all of my former interns, they're all different places now. But it's been really fun to keep up with them on social media and just watch them grow and thrive in their careers.

Tobi: That's so fun. So now you've piqued my interest, I want to hear about what is this age college girl, what are they interested in? What are the things you're learning from these interns that you then take and put into place in all the houses and things?

Liz: Yeah, well, connectivity is a whole huge thing. You've got to be able to plug everything in at all times. So we're always trying to come up with furniture that can be charging as well as just the general wall outlets. We're getting a lot of requests to move away from patterns in fabrics and just go

## Ep #294: How Niching Down Builds Business Resilience with Liz Toombs

with a lot of textures. So there's velvet. There's that kind of slubby bohemian pillow look, that type of thing. We're still seeing so many requests for the deep greens, that's having a big moment. Those are the things that come to mind right off my head.

Tobi: Well, tell me a little more about the meaning that their age group is just more into the anthropology boho look than they are things with patterns or traditional things or florals, is that what you mean? Is it more just an aesthetic for their age group?

Liz: Yeah, that's totally. When they send us their Pinterest board, it's usually those types of things. We'll occasionally get a lot where there's the Laura Park look and the abstract bright, bold colors, but not necessarily a big floral or anything like that anymore.

Tobi: Yeah, that's so funny. I think from my niece and my daughter who are the same age in their college freshmen right now and they're in two different sororities. The number of times I've heard Laura Park in the last six months is a lot. And it's so funny that they know by name and they're ordering what used to be when they were like eight and ten, what's the line of little soft duffel bags and handbags everybody had that was?

Liz: Vera Bradley.

Tobi: Vera Bradley. Yeah, Vera Bradley. Now Laura Park has replaced the Vera Bradley of that. I don't know if it's in younger kids too, probably, but definitely in the college aged student. So it's so funny to me when I hear, like you're saying, these young people talk about brands and trends and things they love and I love that. Okay, so good.

Anything else in the technology field that is impacting your business? Maybe not just with the design, but is there anything with AI or any of the other cool things that are happening in technology that you're finding as you work with universities that's impacting the way that you work?

## Ep #294: How Niching Down Builds Business Resilience with Liz Toombs

Liz: Not yet. I am exploring AI things at this point. We've talked about that, some coaching calls. But I have encouraged some of the design students that I've been talking to. They're not really working with AI within classes. And I've encouraged them to explore it on their own because I think there really could be a benefit to not spending so many design hours on the front end trying to figure out what a client wants and putting some ideas together. And so I'm curious to see how it goes and how these courses may change with the evolution of AI and the more regularly that it's used.

Tobi: Yes. I'm interested in that too. I'm on an email blast from the University of Arkansas College of Architecture, which is where interior design is housed now. And I recently just happened to, I guess the subject line caught my eye. And I opened one of their emails and their architecture and design students had taken public things on campus, notable buildings and structures and even a parking deck and had reimaged them with AI for the future.

And it was so fascinating to see these really wild and unique designs and things they had created through learning how to use the proper prompts in AI to get something imagined and it was fascinating. That for sure will be, I think, something that probably comes through universities, maybe even more than some of the rest of us are impacted, like commercial buildings and universities and things. Because obviously the architectural and design schools teachers are likely interested in the possibilities there. So that's going to be fun to watch.

Liz: Yeah. What a neat way. So I'm all about efficiency. And so I think what a neat way to streamline and become more efficient without having to go through so much on the front end.

Tobi: Yeah, it's amazing. Okay, we haven't talked about how you have diversified your revenue streams, which has been fun. So I know you've started and I know you have some other things that you would like to do at some point in the future. But tell us a little bit about how you have, because this speaks back to this whole idea of the recession proofing of your

## Ep #294: How Niching Down Builds Business Resilience with Liz Toombs

business if that's a thing. But how have you created other opportunities for people to work with you if they're not full service design? And what does that look like and who uses those services?

Liz: Back in 2020 when things were a little slow and uncertain during COVID, Erika on my team and I got together and created an online course targeting those local house corps boards that I previously mentioned, those volunteers that run their houses. And we documented our systems and checklists and the way that we go about planning design projects for Greek clients and put it all into this course.

And then it's available for sales, so that these boards, that either can't afford to hire full service or maybe they're just flat not interested. Maybe they've got somebody who's really great with pattern and color and loves to pick things out, but just isn't sure how to translate that over to the Greek environment. Those are the people that we are serving with this course and yeah, so we just keep it out there. We're always looking at ways that we can tweak it or tighten it up or if something becomes outdated and needs to be updated then we're looking at that too.

But that's been really great for us to have. You were talking about some people being afraid of really honing into a niche market. And I was probably one of those people on the front end. I thought, no, I don't want to just say I only do this. But now I just see how beneficial it is because we were focusing on the Greek clients and then as a result, okay, we can create this course which serves them in a different way. And then maybe there's other things that we create down the road.

Tobi: [Crosstalk] products, furniture with plug-ins inside, furniture with all of the technology in it or durability or all of those things. Because I love what you're saying because yeah, a lot of times we're afraid, at some level we all have this fear of being pigeonholed or something.

But the funny thing about it is my experience and I know it's yours too, as you were just saying is that if you're brave enough to lean into a certain

## Ep #294: How Niching Down Builds Business Resilience with Liz Toombs

lane, it actually opens up the possibilities as opposed to closing them off. It makes you more what, I guess, ready and aware of opportunities when you become an expert in a specific thing.

Liz: Yes, agreed, I fully agree. So it feels counterintuitive, but I would definitely encourage folks to find that specific niche audience.

Tobi: Yeah, I love that. And I love, as you were saying, with the house, the board members, the thing that they need most from you is they're thinking I know how to make a room look pretty, but I don't know how to make it stand up to 200 women. I don't know how to make it last for seven years. I don't know what all these people's needs and habits are because they haven't been studying it the way you do and have been now since 2010. So that's a long time that you've been working in this field and have all of that knowledge.

So do you have other plans or thoughts? What's next for you, continuing the same, is anything changing, what's on the horizon?

Liz: I definitely think continuing the same. I spent this last year with my team just working the processes that we had put into place and seeing what works and what didn't and not trying to have any grand new plans. At some point I would like you and I were just talking about, love to do some products geared towards collegians for sorority houses, whatever that may look like. And so I'm always exploring those opportunities. But I think that's really what's on the horizon right now.

Tobi: That's so fun. Tell us, I know you were recently featured in the Wall Street Journal with sorority house design and you share all those things on your Instagram. So where are all the places that if people want to come check you out or even maybe learn more about this particular niche, where do they find you or find more about this kind of work that you do?

## **Ep #294: How Niching Down Builds Business Resilience with Liz Toombs**

Liz: Our website is pdr-interiors.com and then as far as social you can find us on Instagram and TikTok, PDR Interiors, and then I'm on LinkedIn as well.

Tobi: Okay. And then any resources, if somebody is either a student or they're already working in design or they're tired of residential and they want exposure to this kind of work. Do they just follow people like you that do this? Is there any other information out in the world about, how do they learn more about this field?

Liz: I definitely think looking on social and following people that do this kind of work, I think you can learn a lot. I think there are internship and shadowing opportunities that can come about for people if you want to do more in depth learning. Otherwise it's this almost secret underworld to an extent. And so I think just finding folks that work in it and are familiar with it is the best steps.

Tobi: And any tips for how, if you wanted to break into this field, do you contact architects who do this work, do you contact? How's this, how did you get that? You just had a friend that was the fraternity, a contact at the fraternity house? How does one go about breaking into the underworld of Greek interior design?

Liz: Yeah. I think it really is about your network because that's how I got started. It was I knew someone that was on a board that was managing a house and he pulled me in to do a project. And then it was, that chef for that house was also a chef at this other house so she recommended me to that board. And so it was just word of mouth in that way. And then especially if you're an alum of an organization, you could always reach out to them.

Everyone does it a little bit different. Don't be discouraged if you don't get in right away. But if it's something you're interested in exploring, those are some ways I think you could definitely do that.

## Ep #294: How Niching Down Builds Business Resilience with Liz Toombs

Tobi: Amazing. I love it. Okay, thank you so much for being here. This was fun. I've been looking forward to this for a long time. I knew we were going to have you on at some point. And I think this is just such a fascinating niche to be in and bravo on all the press you've gotten lately and all your success but thanks for sharing all this with our audience.

Liz: I appreciate the opportunity to talk about it, it's always great to talk with you.

Tobi: Awesome. Thank you.

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Okay, so now are you thinking all about sorority house design? Whether you've lived in one yourself and even if you did back in the day, they were not the same thing they are today. Hasn't everything changed? As Liz and I were talking about dorm rooms are so nice and different. Sorority houses are so nice and different. And that's wonderful because those of us with children going and living and staying in these spaces can benefit from that.

But I hope this gave you a whole new perspective on the industry, the niche. And even if it's not this niche that you want to work in, maybe it just opened your eyes to thinking, specializing in something could actually be a positive change for you and your business. So that was fun for me. I hope it was fun for you. And I'll be back next week with another great episode with another fabulous guest and friend talking about another kind of specific niche area in her business. So I'll see you then on *The Design You Podcast*. Bye for now.

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## **Ep #294: How Niching Down Builds Business Resilience with Liz Toombs**

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